

Free education, pensions and the university as a business

Luke Martell

Free education for students and good pensions for university staff seem like different issues. But students are [marching for free education](#) this week and staff are boycotting assessment in [defence of their pensions](#). The two are part of the same story.

There's no democratic mandate for unfree education, for student-paid tuition fees at English universities. Fees were trebled to £9000 by Conservatives with a minority of seats, in coalition with LibDems elected on an anti-fee stance. The '97 Labour government introduced fees in the first place, with a manifesto that [wasn't at all clear](#) that was what they were going to do.

Free higher education is possible. They're [doing it in Germany](#). Scotland has it. Scandinavian countries have free education, as do others. It's economically viable. It's ideology that's behind marketisation, not lack of money. In fact, the system in England may be [more expensive](#) than free education, because of defaults on student loans.

One way to think about free education is as free education – free at the point of delivery to students. But it's not free to fund. It's financed collectively by citizens of society, rather than by individual consumers. It's useful to think of it this way, because then we can count education as for the collective good, and for education rather than about attracting income on the market.

Collectively funded education can do things that universities selling on a market and run like businesses will not. It can be free for students, so accessible to all and not leading to a lifetime of debt. It can keep up student support and education, rather than redirecting resources to marketing and [management salaries](#), as at US [for-profits](#), and [UK universities](#) after student-paid fees were introduced.

Collectively funded education can allow staff and students to be citizens of the university with a say, but universities run like a business adopt top-down management that excludes [members of the community](#) and shuns dialogue. Collectively funded free education can keep up education that's popular but not profitable. [Adult education](#) courses have been closed across UK universities. Not because there isn't demand, there is, but because they don't deliver a 'surplus'. Collective funding allows for cross-subsidy of such courses.

Collectively funded free education can ensure good conditions and pensions for staff, rather than cutting staff costs and [casualising](#), which is what the university run like a business leads to. Collectively funded universities may run what they do not-for-profit, rather than outsource campus services, including academic areas, to for-profits, which business universities do to cut costs. These for-profits will be difficult to regulate if the [Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership](#) goes through.

The [campaign for pensions](#) isn't just about middle-aged lecturers worried about their retirement. It's about future academic staff. And it's about undergraduate students, because a good education requires pensions that attract good staff, and conditions that make employees motivated and committed to their work.

Pensions changes proposed at pre-92 universities will lead to losses of [thousands](#) a year in retirement for many. A new part of the scheme is proposed where employer contributions are cut by a quarter. This section will get bigger and the employer contributions smaller. There's [no economic case](#) for the changes. University [managements](#) and [economists](#) have asked the employers to reassess their [disputed calculations](#).

The employers' aim was to impose these changes, as with the last pensions reforms universities faced. It was only when industrial action, an assessment boycott, was initiated that they were [willing to talk meaningfully](#) to the University and College Union. Dialogue shouldn't be difficult, because [UCU's proposals](#) are pragmatic and offer big sacrifices from employees to come towards the employers' position.

All this is happening while top managers' salaries rise. [Vice-Chancellor's pay](#) has been hiked to compensate for pension losses. The rest won't get a pay rise to make up for retirement reductions, and have faced years of real term pay cuts.

Because changes proposed are drastic and the aim is to impose them, employees have had little choice but industrial action. Employers have cut the wages of those participating by 25%, even though their marking is much less than a quarter of their workload. In [some institutions](#) staff have had pay [deducted by 100%](#) while they boycott assessment. But they work anyway, many for [50 hours a week](#). The deductions aren't in proportion to the assessment that's suspended. So they can only be to deter staff from participating in the action.

The [campaign for free education](#) and the [campaign for good pensions](#) go together. They're both about decent conditions for staff as the basis for a good education. You can get this in a collectively funded free education system. In a business university the push is to cut staff conditions. They're both about citizenship and dialogue, which you can achieve in a collectively funded and free system, not imposition that you get in the university run top-down like a business. And they're about education, which is prioritised in collectively funded free education; not attracting income and cutting staff costs. That's the priority of a business university selling a product on the market.

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